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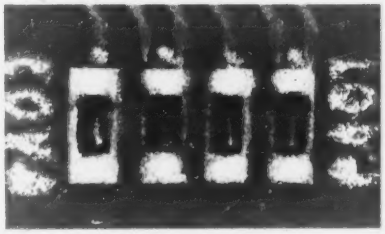

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MEMO FROM THE EDITOR

A silver lining in a stormy situation

At first, we called this month's cover story, "Is the oversupply over? Or are there just too many practices?" As the article evolved, however, it became clear that "too many practices" is only one of the theories being put forth to explain why many veterinarians are having trouble finding associates. Specialization is cited as another reason, as are low salaries, independent-minded practitioners, a decline in veterinary-school enrollment, an increase in the number of part-time doctors, and a general exodus from the farm to the city.

I suspect that an all-encompassing reason is money, but *not* the money that owners can afford to pay their associates. For the most part, I believe that they are paying as much as they can. But I'm not convinced that they're *making* as much as they can. I've heard veterinarians themselves wonder aloud why anyone would enter a profession that pays so little. What they don't seem to realize is that "what the profession pays" is largely up to them.

Management consultant Don Dooley says that the current associate situation may be the catalyst that *forces* veterinarians to charge what they are worth and for what they do. There are, of course, some veterinarians who do that now, and the proof of their success is in their wallets and in their attitudes. And as the Wizard of Oz might say, these veterinarians have nothing more than you do except a belief that clients can and will pay a fair price for the services their pets need.

If generating more income is good for you, good for those who work for you, and effective in keeping veterinary medicine on the map as a "desirable" occupation, I'd say it's a solution worth pursuing. The really good news is that it's good for clients, too. As Dr. David Nelson says (see page 42), "I think that most veterinarians agree that our goal is to provide quality care for our patients and clients, yet the one certainty of undercharging is that we *can't* provide that care."

Becky Turner

Rebecca R. Turner

veterinary economics

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NOTEWORTHY

NATIONAL PET WEEK HITS THE DECADE MARK

On May 6-12, National Pet Week will celebrate its 10th anniversary. This annual program emphasizes the uniqueness of the human-animal bond and informs the pet-owning public of the role veterinarians play in companion animals' health.

This year, the American Humane Association and veterinarians nationwide joined forces with Pet Week sponsors the AVMA, the AVMA Auxiliary, and AAHA in a successful campaign to urge the Senate to pass a resolution declaring May 6-12, 1990, "National Pet Week and Be Kind To Animals Week." (The latter is an annual campaign that began in 1915.)

The resolution, which was introduced by Sen. Pete Wilson (R-CA), now needs 218 co-sponsors before the House of Representatives passes it.

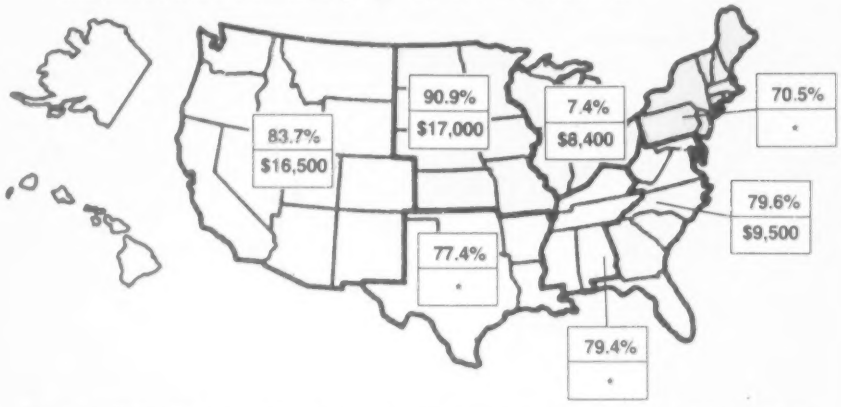
The theme for this year's week is "Happiness is a Healthy Pet." AVMA President Dr. Samuel Strahm says, "With the national focus on pet health during this week, it is the veterinarian's opportunity to take action on issues of concern to the owners of this nation's more than 120 million companion animals."

Educating pet owners is also the focus of a new program that teams practitioners with elementary school teachers to instruct children on proper pet care. The "Adopt-A-Classroom" program, sponsored by Hills' Pet Products, includes a guide for preparing a teaching unit, as well as lesson plans geared to each grade level of elementary school students.

For more information on how you can "Adopt-A-Classroom," call (800) 255-0449. ▶

WHO SELLS RETAIL PRODUCTS? (And how much do they make?)

The map below shows the percentage of veterinarians who sell non-prescription retail products, and the median gross income from these sales.



Source: VETERINARY ECONOMICS Continuing Survey, 1989 *Insufficent base

THE SUCCESS FILE

Management ideas that can make a difference *By Bob Levoy*

Heed these warning signs when hiring

Even job applicants with the right experience for your practice may have qualities that personnel experts consider to be "warning signs" of trouble. Among them:

- A history of "job hopping." Three jobs in five years may be too many, unless the job changes have a sensible pattern—say higher pay or more responsibility. To avoid losing a new hire, offer a job and salary commensurate with the person's experience and expectations.
- Job applicants who reveal confidential information about former employers, their practices, and/or clients. Many practice owners say they would disqualify an applicant just for this lack of judgment.
- Overqualified job applicants. I've heard many veterinarians express more concern about "super competence" than incompetence. Such job applicants can be immensely appealing, but you may be unable to provide work that is sufficiently challenging and interesting to keep them happy.

Recognizing these warning signs will help you avoid the "buy now, pay later" regrets that many doctors have had about employees hired in haste.

Bob Levoy is a management consultant, author, and popular speaker to the veterinary profession.

IS THE OVERSUPPLY OVER?

If there are still too many veterinarians, why is it so difficult to find an associate? The answers offered here run the gamut from specialization to gender, but the larger question remains: How will the profession react to this manpower crisis of a very different kind?

By John Lofflin

Don't tell Dr. Jerry Macfee that there's an oversupply of veterinarians. He's been searching four years to find an associate to help run his McCook, Neb., large animal practice.

And don't tell Dr. Jerry Long, either. He spent all of 1989 looking for an associate to round out his Live Oaks, Calif., mixed animal practice.

Well, of course, you say: With so many veterinarians migrating toward small animal practice, it's not surprising that a few large and mixed practices are having trouble finding associates. It would be different if *small* animal practitioners were having trouble.

Well, that time may have come. Consider the dilemmas of the practitioners described below. Representing a variety of practice types nationwide, they share the need for associate veterinarians.

Just passing through

Dr. Tom Schenck of East Brunswick, N.J., currently manages a small animal hospital with three associates and 18 employees. Like Dr. Long, he spent all of 1989 looking for more help. In the process, he says he got so used to seeing the same classified ads listed next to his, that he routinely gave applicants directions to the next clinic on their East Coast trek. "If you have watched the ads, you know there are a lot of excellent jobs in this state," he says.

Dr. Schenck, a 1958 graduate of Texas A&M University, says he's puzzled by the difficulty he's had finding associate veterinarians. He says his starting salary is generous by national standards, and he offers a 40-hour workweek, with emergency duty one night a week and one weekend a month. His hospital isn't located in a town where they roll up the sidewalks at dusk, either. Applicants, he figures, should be beating a path to his door.

"But the number of responses we've had has been very small," he says. "Everyone I interview has been to five other clinics answering ads."

Dr. Schenck says he is willing to hire new graduates, but he doesn't receive many applications from that group, either. His last two hires were new veterinarians, and he rates them "excellent."

Dr. Schenck says there is no dearth of veterinarians in his area—but there *are* a lot of veterinary practices. When he opened the Edgebrook Veterinary Hospital in 1963, he counted four colleagues. Now he counts 25.

Dr. Schenck points out that part of the problem may be that New Jersey doesn't have a veterinary school. Like many others on the East Coast, his practice has always drawn graduates from Cornell or the University of Pennsylvania. He and area colleagues may not be able to attract Midwestern graduates, he reasons, because they could be squeamish about life on the urban East Coast. "Also, I wonder if the diversification in fields of study has had an impact on us," he says. "I'd like to know if small animal is still growing among veterinary students."

Dr. Schenck steps gingerly around his next theory:"I've got

THE AUTHOR, a contributor to MONEY magazine and a writer for the NEW YORK TIMES, teaches journalism at Park College, Parkville, Mo.

one more question, and I ask this innocently because I sincerely don't know the answer," he says. "I hire a lot of women when I have the opportunity. I have two women on the staff and both have families. One has never worked full-time and the other just cut back to 20 hours a week. I just wonder if anybody has done a study on women who graduate from veterinary schools, and whether they stay in practice after two or three years. I just wonder if this has had an impact on us at all."

Don't jinx it

Dr. Mike Eberhardt of Madison, Wis., doesn't want to ask too many questions: He's superstitious about losing the associate he just hired. The 1966 Michigan State University alum hired an associate January 4 for a position that had been open only 10 days.

You'd think he'd be happy, but he isn't. "I told my wife that I don't even want to talk about the new associate I've hired because I don't want to jinx the thing," he says. "Getting him was a fluke. His wife had been transferred here from Athens, Ga., and she came in and asked me if I needed anyone. If she had come in two days earlier I would have told her to leave a résumé. Instead, we sat down and talked for an hour. She was responding to an ad I ran. By the way, there was only one other response to that ad."

Dr. Eberhardt isn't always so lucky: The last pool of applicants he interviewed didn't include a single veterinarian with experi-

ence. He hired two new graduates for a staff of four that oversees two hospitals; a mistake, he says, because he now believes that new graduates need an environment filled with experienced veterinarians who can serve as mentors.

Dr. Eberhardt's new associate has clinical experience, a criteria he insists upon after having hired —and fired—new graduates. "The pool I had before was terrible," he says. "I was offering an above-average salary for a new graduate, $26,000, which is good for this area. But the new grads I interviewed all needed a big reality pill. We're talking two-hour spays, total incompetence in surgery, and total naiveté about the real world. It'll be a while before I consider hiring a new grad again.

"Maybe the problem is that the experienced ones start their own practices. Nobody works better than they work for themselves. Profit is a valuable motive. I think you have to give associates a reason, and that's why I offer them a chance to work on a percentage basis."

"We have far more individual practices than we need," Dr. Eberhardt concludes. "That may be one reason it's tough to get better people to come in here and enjoy themselves."

Filling the ranks

Pat Conner is the manager of the Confederate Ridge Animal Hospital, a mixed animal practice in Fredericksburg, Va. She coordinates the efforts of co-owners Dr. Alan Witter and Dr. Jim Dunlap, as well as four associate veterinarians. Trouble is, with the practice gross growing rapidly (1989 gross came to $730,000), she needs two more veterinarians as soon as possible.

Of potential associates, Conners says: "If they're experienced, it's tough to get them. We have our eyes on one right now with experience, but he's currently working at another practice. You've got to be fast, because when they leave a practice, they get snatched up very quickly.

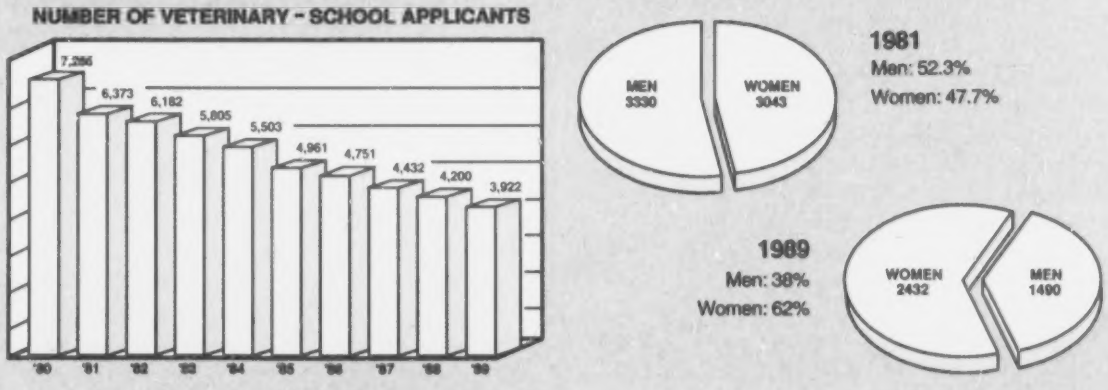
"I've noticed that private time has gotten more important for young veterinarians. I think, for

ON THE ACADEMIC SIDE

John Tasker, DVM, PhD, dean of the Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine, compiles annual, nationwide statistics on veterinary-school applicants. The numbers are steadily declining, with the number of applicants falling from 7,286 in 1980 to 3,922 in 1989. (See charts.)

The statistics confirm that more applicants are female. Men dominated the ranks of applicants by about 300 in 1981. In 1989, there were nearly 1,000 more women applicants than men.

Dean Tasker adds that AVMA statistics show that women make up 21 percent of equine practices, 19 percent of mixed animal practices, and 29 percent of small animal practices.



better or worse, that reflects a change in society. The new graduates feel they worked like dogs in school, and they don't intend to continue working that way now that they've graduated."

Of women veterinarians, Conner says: "This practice has had six male associates and five female associates. On average, the men have stayed with us 8½ years, and the women 16 months, to date. Three of the five women left due to family commitments. It has seemed to us that we've gotten more resistance to long hours from the females. Family commitments apparently are one reason; some of our female associates also have registered concern for their personal safety while working alone at night. For these reasons, we feel a man would be more satisfactory.

"I'd like to add, however, that we've just hired a woman veterinarian for an exclusive small animal position, and we're really happy with her. She has five years' experience and a realistic understanding of the work demands. We discussed her hours thoroughly and agreed on a schedule that works for her and for the practice. She also agreed to take large animal emergency calls when we need her.

"In response to all of the doctors' needs, we've put all of them on two, rotating shifts, which provides a smoother, more efficient work flow, and more predictable hours. We know that to remain competitive and to attract the very best doctors, we have to be flexible, too. As the graduates change, so must we."

An experience shortage

Atlanta small animal practitioner M. Spencer Newman argues against the notion of an "undersupply"—even though it took him nine months to hire his current associate. He was inundated with applications from recent graduates, he says, but getting applications from experienced veterinarians was another story.

"I just wasn't satisfied with the candidates I got," says the 1973 Michigan State University graduate. "I brought several of them in

NEED AN ASSOCIATE? CALL THE AVMA

"We were mobbed," says Dr. Ann Schola Clark when asked to describe the response to the AVMA's new computerized placement service, which went on line October 1, 1989. "We thought it would grow. It has exploded around our ears!"

The service, she says, is more than just a computerized version of the AVMA's placement service bulletin. The computer enables the AVMA to match jobs to applicants via a variety of criteria, from geographic location to specialty.

A practitioner who needs an associate requests an application and lists the requirements and nature of the job; this information is logged into the data base. Job applicants indicate their skills, background, and desires. The computer matches the information and provides the employer with brief résumés on the applicants who fit the specific job. It then rests on the employer to make contact, interview, and so on. The system provides for applicant anonymity when necessary. Applicants also are sent lists of position descriptions.

Dr. Clark says the service also includes government and industry jobs, as well as jobs requiring doctorate and master's degrees. "Right now we've got about 1,000 jobs and about 1,000 applicants," she says. "We haven't even been able to stop long enough to go back and ask people if we helped. But at the big annual meetings, we've seen people hired right in front of us." One applicant at a recent equine convention interviewed for 15 positions without leaving town, she says.

Dr. Clark says she suspects the veterinarian surplus was "actually a distribution problem." Of today's graduates, she says, "When I'm looking at applicants' desires as they enter the system, I'm seeing a lot of new grads who've expressed an interest in large animal, mixed animal, and food animal."

Although the job placement service is currently free, the AVMA board is considering a user fee; when enacted, those already in the service must pay to remain active. For more information, call AVMA's Placement Service at (800) 258-2862.

THE COMING CRISIS: VETERINARY MEDICINE AS A SECOND INCOME

"Everybody I talk to is worried that the schools are full of women students and it's going to have an impact on the number of associates, but that's a pretty sexist idea," says Don Dooley, a practice management consultant in Los Gatos, Calif. Dooley argues that most students today—men and women—consider veterinary practice to be only a *piece* of the financial puzzle.

"Many of the male students hope to marry women professionals who will provide a share of the income," Dooley says. The problem is, he adds, that associate veterinarians take home so little that they find themselves as the ones who meet family needs *at home*.

"There are a lot of house-husband veterinarians," Dooley says. "I know a veterinarian married to an attorney. He's even a practice owner. But if the kids get sick, he stays home to take care of them. She makes $100,000 a year, so it makes economic sense for him to be the baby sitter."

The net result, Dooley contends, is that veterinary medicine attracts students of both sexes who don't want to become full-time professionals. "I see more people going to veterinary school to have something that will be a hobby, not a vocation," he says.

This attitude, Dooley says, may precipitate a crisis that will force the profession to pull itself up again. "We don't do anything without a crisis, and there's about to be a crisis in this profession," he says. "By the mid-1990s, there simply won't be enough veterinarians who want to work."

Dooley's solution: "We've got to get charges up where we can pay people enough to make this a full-time profession again. Who would choose to go to school eight years, wind up with $40,000 in school debt, and go to work in a profession that pays you $24,000 your first year?"

Dooley admits that some young practitioners are doing well in veterinary medicine, but the average starting salaries in many parts of the country speak for themselves. In the Bay Area, he says, starting salaries are about $30,000 a year; with personal monthly rent averaging $800, that's not enough to support a single person, let alone a family.

An even bigger problem, he warns, is that there won't be veterinarians around in the next century who are willing to buy practices when the owners are ready to retire. "When an owner today cautions a new associate that the practice is one with 'long hours,' the associate says: 'Hey, long hours three days a week ain't too bad.' "

part-time to work in the practice on a trial basis, and I simply wasn't happy. Among the problems I encountered were inadequate surgery skills, inaccurate record-keeping, and unauthorized discounting."

Dr. Newman had equally disquieting experiences with the applicants to whom he offered the job. One decided to open his own practice instead. Another called the day before she was to start to say she'd been offered the solo slot in a new hospital. Dr. Newman finally hired an experienced veterinarian from nearby South Carolina and is confident the new doctor will be an excellent fit.

"In retrospect, I think I limited myself too much by only trying to get someone locally," he says. "I didn't think this practice was ready for a new graduate, so I was looking for someone with at least a year's experience. I only advertised nationally near the end of the year, and that's how I got the doctor I hired."

A larger view

Dr. Alan Bush is a management consultant and former small animal practitioner who "coaches" veterinarians in how to run their clinics as small businesses. From his perch "at the end of the highway" in Big Pine Key, Fla., he says that the associate crunch is worse than it was two years ago.

More than a few of his clients "literally can't get people to look at the positions they're trying to fill. They report either no pool of applicants, or a pool so small they can't control the hiring procedure," he says. Most of the un-

filled jobs, he adds, involve adequate salaries and good working conditions. And they aren't all in remote corners of the forest, he says: "They're in Boulder, Colo., Northern California, interesting areas on the East Coast. . ."

According to Dr. Bush, if there is an oversupply, it's of practices, not people: "We may indeed have too many practices, but I don't think we have too many veterinarians." Why? Money, he says. "If the average income of a veterinarian is $41,000 a year, it's not hard to see why there isn't anyone in the pipeline today.

"I just got back from the West Coast. I met a recent college grad on the plane who was on his way to work at Boeing. His was also a six-year degree, but it was in metallurgic engineering. He said he was starting out at $100,000 with no experience."

"Starting salary for associates ranges from about $20,000 to $30,000 a year," he continues. "For that amount, in many parts of the country, you can't afford to have a spouse and children, or to own your own home."

Dr. Bush adds that many recent graduates rush to start their own clinics rather than settle into associate spots. "We see them going into practice very quickly today," he says. "Veterinarians in general tend to be very independent."

Dr. Bush also raises the thorny gender issue, and asks what impact women veterinary graduates have on the associate pool. "What percentage have stayed in the profession since 1973 when they started graduating in large numbers?" he asks. "I have to think a higher percentage have left the profession, or are practicing part-time, than male graduates. Everyone—male or female—who comes out of the pipeline and doesn't practice lowers the numbers."

Mixed animal dilemma

The difficulty of finding associates could produce more than jangled nerves and increased classified advertising revenues: In some cases, practice owners are about to settle for a stagnant practice.

In the California valley, for example, Dr. Jerry Long sees no sign of workload relief in his three-person mixed animal clinic. If it weren't for the three pickup trucks, the expensive fiber-optiscope, and the rest of his costly equipment, he says, he'd just chuck the whole idea of a growing practice and settle into a comfortable, one-person load.

The 1976 Washington State

AS SOCIETY CHANGES, SO MUST THE PROFESSION

"I thought that was an old chestnut," Dee Jacobson, DVM, says with a chuckle. The idea that the increased number of women veterinarians is behind the problems some practitioners have finding associates, she says, belongs to the past. "I guess they've just got to blame something."

Dr. Jacobson, once a practice owner herself, says she thinks women are just as interested as men in owning practices, and have no more difficulty than their male colleagues finding funds to buy or start practices. But both men and women veterinarians, she says, are more picky about where they settle.

"There *is* a problem finding good associates for private practice," says the San Francisco veterinarian, who also serves as president of the Association for Women Veterinarians. "I think it depends more on where your practice is located, but it is not related to the fact that there are more women in the profession. A lot of women practitioners have children, and most continue working up to the delivery and start back soon after. On the other hand, there are a lot of men who do relief and part-time work."

Dr. Jacobson attributes the increased ratio of women to men in the profession to economic realities . "The expected income today is not very good; that's what has changed the demographics," she explains. "Women may be less interested in the bottom-line economics of the profession, so they've taken up the slack.

"Once you're in the profession, the return on your hard work just isn't the same that it was when I graduated in 1970. People want a certain quality of life—it's not a sexual issue at all. It's the way society has changed. Graduates just have a different attitude today."

alum says that when he first advertised the position, he thought he'd quickly have plenty of résumés. Interviewees "bounced in and out" all year, but either they weren't interested, or he didn't think they were right for the job.

"There are basically two kinds of applicants out there," he says. "You either have middle-aged guys who are selling their practices and are prone to changing their minds, or you have new graduates in mixed animal who don't know enough. For one thing, they're not trained to deal with people. They don't study enough business, so they aren't able to understand the owner's point of view. And they have no sales ability. You've got to be able to sell your services or you won't have anybody to do them for."

Dr. Long says he's not alone in his search for an associate; he quickly ticks off the names of eight other DVMs in a 60-mile radius who are looking for associates. "When people interview today, salary is not the first thought on their minds," he says. "The first question is the work schedule. The second is the emergency situation, and the third is wages."

Dr. Long thinks his practice ought to be attractive to associates. It's a progressive practice, he says, the first to be computerized in the area—nearly a decade ago. And it grossed almost $600,000 in 1989. Even so, he's had a tough time finding associates who fit in.

"Of the last four, only one fit in snugly right away," he says. "In mixed animal practice, it takes a new person at least three months to find his way around the country efficiently. By then, there should be clients calling and asking for him, and everybody should begin to feel comfortable working together."

> "If the average income is $41,000, no wonder there isn't anyone in the pipeline today."

Now that's a long wait

If Dr. Long thinks he's waited a while to hire an associate, Dr. Jerry Macfee could set him straight. Dr. Macfee's McCook, Neb., large animal practice has always employed one or two associates, but the doctor has not been able to hire anyone with "client acceptability" since 1986. He says he sees a sparse crop of recent graduates willing and able to be associates in a large animal practice.

"I've made up my mind to just do what I can now," he says. "I've narrowed my practice to my real good clients, and my gross is still growing every year, but I'm not doing a lot of the services I'd do if I had someone else."

Dr. Macfee says his quest has been so long that he can't remember when he stopped advertising. A veterinary-school dean sometimes sends a graduate to McCook to interview, but with so many positions open in places closer to their roots, few stay. "It's not salary," Dr. Macfee says. "I'm not flinching at what they're asking for."

Dr. Macfee says he thinks the problem is simply that so few veterinary students are interested in large animal practice. Like others, he attributes that partially to the urbanization of veterinary schools: "When I was accepted at Kansas State in 1958, the criteria included whether you had a farm background, whether you had been in 4-H—questions that were designed to measure your chances for success in large animal practice. But the veterinary schools took that rural aspect out of the selection process. People from rural areas couldn't cut it as often as people from the cities, who probably went to better high schools."

Dr. Macfee also questions what impact the increase in women veterinary students has had on the number of large animal graduates. "They take up half the seats," he says. "But I only know a half-dozen food animal practitioners in the whole state of Nebraska who are women."

Dr. Macfee says he thinks there's a profound change working in the nature of large animal practice as a result of the associate shortage. "In areas like mine, we may have to look at training lay people to do much of the technical work while we act more as consultants," he says. "We may also need to look at training our clients to do the routine procedures themselves."

"I think the crisis is here," he concludes. "I just don't think we've recognized it yet." ■